Algorithms of Compliance

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a review of
Uncanny Valley by Anna Wiener. Macmillan/Farrar Straus Giroux/MCD Books (Holtzbrinck Publishing Group) 2020

To escape her stagnant work as an assistant in publishing, Anna Wiener sold out and took a job in tech. Now she's written about her experience, and published it. The result, *Uncanny Valley*, is a portrait of Silicon Valley from the perspective of a literary impostor, promising to reveal the scandalous truth.

Wiener's truth is a familiar one. The "rocket ship" startup that hires her makes software that allows companies to harvest data from their users. The CEO uses fear to control his workers, and demands total commitment. Wiener endures constant sexism, and finds herself apologizing to men for being right. The story is nothing new, but it's Wiener's observations that make it fascinating. The book glitters with fine details, illuminating the absurd reality of a regressive culture obsessed with utopia. This contradiction produces the dark humor at the heart of the book.

Despite Silicon Valley's rhetoric of exceptionalism, Wiener is clear that it is just another capitalist system working as designed. When she complains to a coworker about how their product encourages addiction, her coworker remarks that he "[doesn't] see any incentive for change." When a diversity management consultant speaks at the office, Wiener's coworkers become concerned that a focus on diversity will "lower the bar." Under capitalism, moral failures are often the most efficient choice.

Wiener reveals her thoughts from the period with powerful honesty. She shows us how she justified the actions of her domineering boss, her rich friends, and the startups she worked for. She ignores her concerns about her company's privacy violations, and immerses herself in the demands of the job. Then, severed from her feelings, she projects her dissatisfaction onto the powerful men around her, becoming obsessed with their lost happiness, their unmet desires. It could not have been easy to reveal these contorted thoughts from the past. But in doing so, she captures something essential about how people submit to power and assist the unethical.

Wiener doesn't bore us by flagellating herself for her mistakes, or analyzing the causes of her own ethical failures. She isn't looking for forgiveness. Instead she shows us what motivated her entrance into tech. To escape the hopeless pit of the millennial job market, tech's wealth and optimism seemed worth the self-deceit. But of course, the denial catches up with her. She feels disconnected from the people around her, and eventually sits still for long enough to realize that she's deeply unhappy.

Before Wiener leaves with her sliver of vested options, she has a conversation with a coworker about unions. Her coworker crushes her optimism by arguing that unions have no place in the privileged tech world. He believes that they would only be used for personal leverage. Wiener lends authority to his opinion by emphasizing his working-class background. But concern about unions being used improperly seems more like hopelessness than an argument against them. And while it is true that high salary tech workers have less to gain from unions, Wiener seems to have forgotten about the technical and nontechnical contract workers who keep Silicon Valley running.

I was one of these technical contract workers. I moved to the area in late 2016, just as Wiener was making her exit. My migration to the valley was part of a larger influx of uncredentialed self-taught programmers. We were not, like Wiener, drawn by actual jobs, but instead by rumors of work.

When I arrived at the programming bootcamp where I would remain for over a year, I was told that it was not a programming bootcamp. It was a private, non-profit, peer-to-peer, tuition-free software engineering school. A French billionaire had bought up the gutted remains of a DeVry university campus, thrown a thousand computers into it, and hired eight people to make sure it didn't get completely vandalized. Initial admission was determined through a frustrating series of online puzzles. When we arrived, we were given the key to our free dorm and instructed, through poorly translated pdfs, to write various programs in the C language. We were not taught; we were told what to do. Our output was graded by a mysterious automated system. We only had each other and google, and if we failed to keep up, we were evicted.

Hundreds showed up, eager to be subjected to this treatment with no guarantee of reward. The degrading realities of the school acted as a filter, drawing forth the true failures of capitalism, those most desperate for a second chance. We had been told that tech work was valued by society, and we wanted to be valued. Wiener's *Uncanny Valley* captures this desperation accurately, but not to the screaming intensity that I saw.

Months passed, and the school packed the dorms tighter, four people to a room. My three roommates and their two cats were moving around at all hours, and nobody could sleep. We all cooked on hot plates jammed onto desks between gaming setups, despite the persistent objections of the dorm-wide smoke alarms. We arranged our laundry on lines that wove back and forth across the room, leaving no space empty. We hung blackout curtains to block the fluorescent street lights, but none of us had the energy to open them in the daylight. Everything was accumulating grime, and things were breaking that we didn't know how to fix.

As we completed the program and received job offers, a few friends, who had arrived with degrees or experience, got serious offers with real salaries. Nearly everyone else was offered hourly contract work for close to minimum wage. With eviction looming, most of us took these jobs.

I began to see that tech companies wanted to cultivate a comfortably large pool of uncredentialed, exploitable labor. They had been striving for years to turn the labor market in their favor, encouraging everyone to learn to code, and their campaigns had been successful. We were trained scabs for an industry without unions, an industry that had stumbled into collective power by a fluke of scarcity.

I watched as half of my friends broke down under the stresses of their new jobs. Many of us were required to do the work of experienced programmers with little guidance. Substance abuse was rampant. Some friends broke through and got promoted. Others quietly returned to whatever it was that they'd been doing before. A few are still living in vans in the parking lots of multi-billion-dollar companies.

The failure of *Uncanny Valley* is Wiener's assertion that nobody in the tech industry is vulnerable enough to require a union. Despite her keen observation, she didn't notice us. It's possible that technical contract labor was not yet widespread when Wiener worked in tech. But well-salaried people like Wiener rarely noticed us, because we knew to keep our struggles hidden. Enmeshed in the system that oppressed us, we believed that our poverty was our fault, something to be ashamed of, not a system that was failing us.

Computer science is labor, and programmers are not immune to exploitation. As more skilled workers enter the job market, more exploitation will occur. These trends are already accelerating, and the solution is an organized workforce. By discounting the influence that strong unions could have on a corrupt industry, Wiener's splendid book ultimately ends with passive hopelessness.

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